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MRS. SARAH T. BOLTON, POETESS.

THE FIRST SINGER IN A NEW LAND.

[The following sketch of Mrs. Bolton is abridged from an article by a friend, Mrs. Gertrude Garrison, published in the *Indianapolis Journal*, February 22, 1880. It gives an intimate and first-hand picture of a striking personality whose memory should be preserved.—EDITOR.]

Sarah T. Bolton was for many years the first and only literary woman in the Mississippi valley. More than forty years ago, when poetry was as phenomenal in the West as stars in daylight, she became known to Indiana as a poet, and has held that rank in the peerage of letters ever since. * * * Mrs. Bolton is still with us, and there is not the slightest hint of a decrease of intellectual vigor in her literary work. The years have broadened her thought, given her greater versatility and greater scope. She is sixty-six years old, and, after the manner of intellectual women, has gained something from time, instead of surrendering all to him. Her face has gathered lines where roses once bloomed, and the glad light of youth has given place to the calm expectation that belongs only to those who have put their lives behind them. She has a petite figure and intellectual face, and an abundance of beautiful brown hair, in which the threads of glittering gray are still very rare. Her movements are quick, like those of a bird, and her manners natural and pleasing. She knows how to say agreeable things cleverly, and the desire to confer pleasure is a part of her nature. It would be impossible to describe her personality. It has been attempted many times, and always resulted in blank failure. She is herself, individual and distinctive, unlike anybody else. To see her once is to remember her always. You might say of her that she is quaint; she is like a portrait you would find in some old magazine, odd and interesting, with an original confusion of laces and unique feminine adjuncts. She has never vexed herself with fashion's mandates. She wears what she has with grace and dignity, and is as attractive in garments made seasons ago as any one could be arrayed in the latest mode. She is dainty in everything. * * *

Mrs. Bolton is a Kentuckian by birth. Her father was the youngest son of Lemuel Barrett, a distinguished officer in the war for independence. Her mother was one of the Pendletons, of Virginia, who were related to James Madison. When Sarah was a toddling baby her father came to Indiana, and settled in Jennings county. The country was wild, the forests almost unbroken, and civilization still in the future. Not liking this isolation, he removed to Madison, and there his daughter grew to womanhood. She received the best education the place afforded, and in school was distinguished for unusual brightness. Some of the boys who trudged by her side up and down the long hill between the old and new town every day (the school was in North Madison) have earned renown in life, among them Jesse D. Bright, who was considered the "smartest boy in school," as Sarah Barrett was the "smartest girl." She is the only one of the girls who has won distinction.

* * *

Miss Barrett married young and was fortunate in her marriage. Her husband, Nathaniel Bolton, was in newspaper life in Madison, and in 1822, in connection with Judge Smith, his stepfather, had published the Indianapolis Gazette, the pioneer newspaper of the city. Mr. Bolton was a man of great energy and ability, and during his life was largely identified with the development and upbuilding of the State. In addition to his newspaper work, he served the State in several important public positions. He was register of the land office in this city, a member of the Legislature, State librarian, and in 1855, under President Pierce's administration, was consul at Geneva, Switzerland. He died in 1858. One who knew him well said of him: "He was a man of blameless life, of honest motives, and of useful exertions." With him Mrs. Bolton, though she saw much happiness, experienced some financial stringency and performed much hard labor. They were possessed of considerable property until the great pressure of 1837 and 1838. Speaking of that era, Mrs. Bolton said:

"Few of this later generation ever saw such times. There was absolutely no money. Property was a burden instead of a help to any one. It could not be converted into food or clothing. I made our garments from the sheep's back. As for leisure, I had none.

What time I was not cooking, or spinning, or sewing, I helped my husband in the office. Printers were scarce in those days, and sometimes money was still scarcer, and so I learned typesetting, and did what I could toward helping my husband do his press-work. The first rollers ever made in Indianapolis were cast in my kitchen."

Mrs. Bolton accompanied her husband to Geneva. General Drake and his wife went with them to Paris. Their little party were the first people who ever went to Europe from Indiana, and the event excited wonder and talk, for going to Europe then seemed about as feasible as a journey to the moon. Mrs. Bolton says she still remembers the incredulous looks and badly concealed smiles of disbelief with which her talk of the proposed trip was received. People who started for so distant a land as Europe were considered as good as lost by their townsmen. The fervent goodbyes sent after them were like those spoken to the dying. The residence of the poetess abroad was one of the brightest epochs in her life. She had achieved as much fame as any American poet, more than any other American woman, and her house was the resort of the literati of the new world who visited Geneva. Bayard Taylor, Horace Greeley, and many others distinguished in letters and politics, were always made welcome to the parlors of the American consul.

Mrs. Bolton knows, better perhaps than any younger author, how meager is the financial recompense for the products of the mind. That she was able to win as much consideration as she did while the country was so new and unlettered, is marvelous. While her poems were going the rounds of the few literary periodicals then in existence, and were being read and admired everywhere, she was at home working hard at some drudgery of the household which a few dollars would have paid some one less gifted intellectually for doing. Had she received ever so small a compensation, it would have lightened her labors, encouraged her, and afforded her time for more literary work. As it was, her opportunities for writing were so rare, a market for her work so uncertain, and her other duties so numerous, that only when thought came and fought for utterance did she pause

long enough in her busy life to transcribe it to paper. After her husband's financial reverses they removed to a farm which is now the site of the asylum for the insane. There they lived ten years, seven of which went by, in which her hands had no time to wield the pen.

One of the mediums through which the world was made acquainted with her name was the *Home Journal*, of New York. It was then a "leading" literary paper, conducted by N. P. Willis and George P. Morris, personal friends of Mrs. Bolton. It was the means of introducing all the writers to each other and the public, and did much toward developing the country's literature.

Thirty years ago Robert Dale Owen wrote a sketch of Mrs. Bolton for the *Home Journal* which was widely copied. It is not strange that this paper was so well loved. It was for a while almost the only outlet for literary talent. It was the one gleam of brightness in an ocean of darkness, in which poets and story-writers drifted in hopeless isolation. The aspiring soul knows no more sickening sensation than that of finding no channel through which it can reach appreciative ears. *Sartain's Magazine* was another medium through which Mrs. Bolton sang to the world. The few copies of it still preserved in old garrets and libraries contain, among many curious as well as excellent specimens of literature, some of the popular songs and poems we all remember to have heard in our childhood, whose author we scarcely thought of. The name of Sarah T. Bolton will be found attached to them. In lyrical composition Mrs. Bolton has been remarkably successful. She wrote fifteen songs which were long popular wherever the English language is spoken, and yet—how perverse is the law of compensation!—she was never enriched one dollar by them. "Paddle Your Own Canoe," "I Cannot Call Her Mother" and "A Reply to Katy Darling" were among them. Publishers frequently wrote her requesting a song. She always graciously complied with the request, though often at great inconvenience on account of her busy life; and the only return they ever made her was to send a copy or two of the song when it was published. One music publisher sold 22,000 copies of one of her songs, and yet never paid her a dollar nor

sent her a word of thanks. Publishers, as well as republics, are ungrateful. When the Cincinnati Commercial began its existence its intent was literary—a trend it has not entirely departed from to this day. It paid her \$15 for three poems. This was so munificent a price, in comparison with what she had ever before received, that to this day she laughingly declared she never hears the Commercial mentioned without feeling a throb of unspeakable gratitude.

While she was building her reputation the antagonism between the East and West was more definitely marked than now. Anything sent to an Eastern publisher from a writer in the West not personally known to him was moderately sure to come back to the author, accompanied by a polite but disheartening note to the effect that "though the article was not without merit, and its author was assuredly destined to literary renown, etc., etc., it was not exactly suited to their columns." That was the courteous way Eastern editors sawed off the budding geniuses of the West at the knees. A poem of Mrs. Bolton's was sent back to her by the Harpers, but after it had appeared in an English magazine it was copied into Harper's Weekly and highly praised because it had been written by an American lady. Like all other writers, she has been robbed of much of the honor due her by vague and indefinite credits, such as, "The following exquisite poem, written by a lady of the West, has been received with general favor everywhere," or, "An Indianapolis lady contributes these charming verses." She relates an instance of the contrast between the measure of appreciation of literature in England and in this land of the free and cradle of slang. She sent a poem of two or three verses to the editor of an English magazine, thinking it would be compliment enough to have it appear in so critical a publication, whose pages were brightened by the best minds of Europe. It was published with illustrations, and she was astonished and delighted to receive a five-pound note from the publisher, and a letter which was almost dazzling in its praises, and which urged her to send him contributions often. At that time she was in no special need of money, and her time engrossed by other duties, and so this rare opportunity went by.

Those were hard days on poets. There was but little to inspire genius and much to oppress it. But poetry is harder to kill than ragweed. It will grow, let the soil be what it may. There were some rich people in Indianapolis when Mrs. Bolton was poor, who might have given her much substantial encouragement, but they did not.

Yet, though there were enough and too many persons of the same order, there were many excellent, sympathetic and appreciative men and women in Indianapolis even then, who were companionable and congenial in many respects. Society was necessarily crude and unlettered. Men were hewing a foothold in life and women were helping them. Mrs. Bolton's friends were the first people of the State. Governors and officials of every degree were well known to her. "But you have no idea," she says, "how coarse and commonplace they often were. Occasionally a member of the Legislature would have some faint perception of something fine in literature, would read a book through at rare intervals, and be able to catch a glimmering idea of its beauties of diction and splendor of thought, but for the most part literature was the last thing they thought of."

Contemporaries of her own sex within the State she had none, save Mrs. Julia L. Dumont, of Ohio, who became a resident of Vevay in 1814. In Cincinnati there were the Carey sisters and a few others, and one or two in Louisville. How can we who have around us a population teeming with intellectual wealth, rich in poets and literary stores, imagine the solitude Mrs. Bolton must have dwelt in in that time when against poetry every door seemed barred and bolted?

REMINISCENCES OF THE EDITOR.

When the above was written Mrs. Bolton lived at her country place, "Beechbank," about four miles southeast of Indianapolis, near the present suburban town of Beech Grove. There she hoped and expected to end her days, but circumstances determined otherwise, and in time she returned to the city, where she died. The early home of the present writer was in the neighbor-

hood of Beechbank, and he well remembers the mingled awe and curiosity he felt when he saw her first, at a cattle sale, where she was bidding in live stock for her farm, her genial presence and bubbling humor adding grace even to that prosy environment. She was just home from abroad, and in that rustic neighborhood her reputation as a distinguished poetess and traveler loomed big. Later the boy in question came to know her better, and among his pleasantest memories are those of this piquant and delightful mother of Indiana verse. Her social qualities, for which she was justly famed, were of the rare kind that applied always and everywhere. In a country party as in a fashionable city gathering, she genuinely and with keen zest shared the spirit of the occasion, and at vis-a-vis the rudest swain or maiden forgot their uncouthness. Once or twice I (to adopt the more convenient pronoun) saw her at a "literary," similar to the one where Tomps read his immortal paper on "Dreenin' Swamps," and there was something childlike in the joy with which she participated. People untrained socially harbor a quick jealousy and resent any imitation cordiality that hints of condescension, and the fact that Mrs. Bolton wholly allayed this feeling on every occasion can be explained only on the ground of her broad and real sympathies and the utter lack of any sense of superiority.

In those days, when the adolescent imagination was at its high tide, the literary bee buzzed melodiously in my bonnet, and I had mapped out a literary chart of no mean intentions—the elemental qualities of height, breadth and depth it had a-plenty; and as yet—oh, golden age! the deadening wand of disillusion had not touched the dream. My good friend, the poetess, was the first person in my experience to cheerfully sit and listen to all I had to unfold from the heart of many voluminous manuscripts, and, in the midst of her martyrdom, to call for more. I may add that she was also the last. Looking back on it now and psychologizing, I think that she really found a joy in those seances—that her unsoured milk of human kindness and wealth of sympathy were so genuine as to be proof against such an inconsequential thing as raw would-be literature.

A reminiscence with its own particular flavor is that of certain

Sunday evenings at Beechbank, when a few kindred spirits foregathered in the Bolton parlor, with its old-fashioned furnishings, its "whatnots" of bric-a-brac and its stores of curios, and pictures that spoke of the far-off lands where she had sojourned. At such times this sanctuary was a veritable salon, and if the lonely fields without stretched away in wintry desolation, it only intensified the comfort and pleasure of these long and varied conversazioni.

When the shadows began to gather in the little parlor and the landscape without to grow dim, then came the most memorable feature of these red-letter occasions—the Sunday evening tea. At these little spreads everything was unusual and had its flavor. The vast snowy napkins of finest fabric were relics of the European days; on each china plate was a verse, original with our hostess, written in her own distinctive chirography and burned into the ware; the other furnishings were in keeping, each suggestive of associations, and not least of our relishes was the honor of having our teapot presided over by the most distinguished poetess in Indiana. I have in my mind's eye a very graphic picture of her as she sat there at the head of the table, crowned with her little lace head-dress, and ever alert to join in the talk.

All who knew Mrs. Bolton will remember her rare charm as a conversationalist—her flowing vivacity enhanced by many gestures, the play of the mobile features and the ever-ready pervasive humor. There were few subjects she could not touch upon with a light and airy grace, but she was at her best when encouraged to talk in a reminiscent vein and pour out the riches of a long and varied experience. Her verbal account of scenes abroad outranked anything I ever read by virtue of the personal flavor and spontaneity that belong to a good raconteur; and from the glamour of this theme she could glide with equal interest to the experiences of rude pioneer days in Hoosierdom, telling how as a young bride she made her wedding trip from Madison to Indianapolis on horseback, her trousseau in a pair of saddle-bags; of her buckeye cabin home at the capital, from which the green sprouts grew; of the subsequent life on the farm occupied now

by the insane asylum, where she raised poultry, made butter and performed the manifold labors of a farmer's wife. Then there was the "Paddle Your Own Canoe" story, relating how, transformed now from a farmer's wife to the helpmeet of the State Librarian, who was also the general utility man of the State House, she prepared, without help, the carpets for the legislative halls, and, with the work upon her knee and paper and pencil beside her, jotted down by installments her most famous poem, inspired by the difficulties which she herself was overcoming. These stories were always so piquantly told that they bore repetition without losing interest.

The secret of it all was the keen zest with which, from first to last, Mrs. Bolton greeted life, and the lively fancy which ever awoke to play about her theme. In one sense, she never grew old; her relish of things continued to the end, and a pleasure once tasted was never forgotten. The last time I saw her—shortly before her death—her first words were: "Do you remember those teas we used to have together?" And throughout the final sickness her mind reverted to the sunny scenes of a long life that had also known its deep shadows.

Mrs. Bolton, while widely recognized and lauded within the borders of her own State, yet reaped but little financial benefit from her works, and, while not at all given to vanity, she could not but feel that the commonwealth for which she had done an earnest and needed service, might have shown a more substantial appreciation. When a collection of books was being made for the World's Fair at Chicago, she was asked to contribute a copy of her poems. As she could not do so without first purchasing the copy, she declined, and when pressed, replied with a touch of acerbity that as the people of Indiana had never thought enough of her poems to pay for their printing, they need scarcely be concerned about them now.

The poetess died August 5, 1893, at 504 South New Jersey street, Indianapolis. A newspaper account of her death and funeral says: "It was her desire to die as the sun went down, and on Friday evening she asked to be turned that she might face the sun. She told those who watched by her bedside that

she would go away as the sun sank in the west, and after she had been placed so that she might see it fall lower and lower her spirit seemed to pass with it into the great beyond. So when the time for her funeral was set, the sunset hour, which she loved so well, was chosen."

She lies in Crown Hill cemetery beside the husband of her youth, Nathaniel Bolton, and the simple marker at the head of her grave bears the inscription suggested by this writer:

SARAH T. BOLTON:
1814-1893.

THE FIRST SINGER IN A NEW LAND.

G. S. C.

[This poem by Mrs. Bolton, hitherto unpublished, was found among her papers after her death. For it we are beholden to a granddaughter, Mrs. Adah Bolton Mann, now of Cambridge, Massachusetts. It is all the more interesting because it is a graceful tribute and a generous Godspeed from the pioneer singer to the most gifted and best beloved of an era that she helped to create.]

TO JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

Riley, if Nature made thy counterpart,
In any country, any tribe or clan,
In all my wanderings o'er earth-peopled chart,
I never found, as yet, the gifted man.

If one is good and great who whiles our care,
Make us forget awhile the ills of Fate,
Lightens the burden every soul must bear,
Then, O sweet singer, thou art good and great.

Art good, in that thy stories, queer and quaint,
Touch close the heart of Nature and the truth,
And move alike the sinner and the saint
To kindly charity and tender ruth.

God speed thee onward, upward, to the hight
That only His anointed ones may climb;
Since His command went forth, "Let there be light,"
The poet's mission is a work sublime.

December 25th, 1891.

SARAH T. BOLTON.